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THE MARX-BAKUNIN CONFLICT AT THE INTERNATIONAL: A CLASH OF POLITICAL PRACTICES

Jean-Christophe ANGAUT

The conflict within the International that brought Marx and Bakunin up against one another has usually been discussed in terms of a comparison between principles (“libertarian socialism” versus “authoritarian socialism,” for example) or in terms of personal relations. The object of the present contribution, in contrast to those approaches, is to compare the political practices of Marx and Bakunin within the context of the IWA. This does not mean that the personal (and national) relationship between the two played no role; Bakunin wrote on this specific subject.¹ Nor does it mean that the attempt to set up such a comparison between practices disregards any question of an opposition between political principles. The idea is to enrich that opposition, to make it more precise, and to flesh it out, as opposed to the attitude taken by too many commentators, which is overdetermined by the later history of the relations between communism and anarchism, or who just transpose the hostility, the maneuvering, and the reciprocal ignorance that governed the relationship between these two thinkers.² In this way we avoid the risks associated with a retrospective reading, but it is also necessary to place at a distance the consciousness the actors themselves had of the process in which they were involved, and to relate the personal conflict to the split that caused the First International to break up. As we shall see, although Bakunin often only reformulated the positions of sections or of whole federations of the International, the question is more delicate when it comes to Marx.

It is important first to retrace the history of the conflict between Marx and Bakunin within the International, before examining the two themes around which their opposition crystallizes: that of the status of political

1. Mikhail Alexandrovich Bakounine [Bakunin], “Rapports personnels avec Marx,” in *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Champ Libre, 1974), 2:119–130. In order to do justice to this psychologizing interpretation of the relationship between Marx and Bakunin, see also the letter from Bakunin to Herzen of October 28, 1869, announcing that a struggle with Marx was going to take place “over a question of principle,” not for personal reasons, in Mikhail Alexandrovich Bakounine, *Le Socialisme libertaire* (Paris: Denoël, 1973), 216.

2. The limits of a simple comparative procedure and the necessity of a comparison between the practices of Marx and those of Bakunin were nonetheless emphasized by Gaetano Manfredonia, “En partant du débat Marx, Proudhon, Bakounine,” *Contretemps* 6 (February 2003): 88–100.

questions within the association, and that of the internal organization of the International itself.

BAKUNIN'S MEMBERSHIP OF THE INTERNATIONAL

Bakunin joined the International in June 1868, three months before quitting (along with his friends) the League of Peace and Liberty in order to found the International Alliance for Socialist Democracy. The latter, transforming its sections into sections of the International,³ collectively joined the International with the approval of the General Council, in which the influence of Marx was preponderant. In order to compensate for the disappearance of the Alliance as an international organization, Bakunin set up a secret Alliance, which maintained and even radicalized the founding principles of the preceding associations he had organized, so that in 1869, Bakunin was at the same time a member of the Alliance, which was absorbed by the International but continued to exist as such until August 1871, as well as a member of the International itself, and of the secret Alliance. Marx, contrary to what Bakunin thought, was only a member of the IWA, because the League of Communists, for whom he wrote the *Manifesto* with Engels, had long since disappeared.

Marx and Engels's mistrust of Bakunin began when the Alliance requested membership of the International. Marx considered that "M. Bakunin—behind the scenes of this affair—deigns to place the workers' movement under Russian command."⁴ This general accusation comprises four particular ones, which are mentioned frequently with regard to Bakunin's activity within the International: (1) Pan-Slavism: Engels had already opposed the "Appeal to the Slavs" issued by Bakunin in 1849; (2) His ambition to become dictator of the International;⁵ (3) The intent to substitute the Alliance's program for that of the International; (4) Political abstentionism. Marx saw Bakunin as an adventurer trying to infiltrate the association with personal ambition and national sentiment. He communicated this to Engels in a letter: "This Russian appears to

3. In fact the IWA was only a federation of sections or local federations. What is more, the program for the Alliance, at the time of its collective request for membership in the IWA, included a mention of the equalization of classes and individuals, drawing on Marx's remark that, "It is not a matter of equalizing classes, but of doing away with them." On these questions see the circular of the General Council for 1872, "Les prétendues scissions dans l'Internationale," 7–9 (cited in Bakunin, *Œuvres complètes*, 3:271–272—for the complete text see <http://libcom.org/library/splits4-iwma> [Marx and Engels, *Textes sur l'organisation* (Paris: Spartacus, 1970)]). In his letter to Marx of December 22, 1868, Bakunin said that he was right, and explained the confusion over vocabulary by the necessity of convincing the bourgeois audience of the Ligue de la Paix et de la Liberté.

4. Letter to Engels of December 15, 1868, http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1868/letters/68_12_15.htm [Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Correspondance* (Paris: Éditions Sociales, 1983), 9:395.]

5. Whence, also, the idea that Bakunin wanted to transfer the seat of the General Council to Switzerland, although the Russian revolutionary explicitly says the opposite: he favors a reduction in the powers of the council and does not seek to gain influence over it. See the "Confidential Communication" written by Marx in the name of the General Council addressed to German sections of the International, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1870/03/28.htm>.

want to become the dictator of the European workers' movement. He needs to watch his step, or he will be officially excommunicated."⁶

This suspicion regarding Bakunin's suspected intentions regarding the International existed prior to two events that are customarily thought to mark the beginning of the conflict: the Basel Congress in September 1869, which saw the proposition of the "collectivists" concerning the abolition of inheritance rights adopted—against Marx's advice⁷—and the schism within the Romande Federation of the International in April 1870, which gave rise to the Jura Federation. Beginning in March 1869 Marx expresses his concern to Engels about the favorable reception of the Alliance's program in France, Switzerland, Italy, and Spain, and the risk of a split in the European workers' movement brought about by the Alliance's entry into the International.⁸ The split that occurred in the Romande Federation of the International in April 1870 only confirmed Marx's suspicions, and gave him an opportunity to repeat the accusations he had been making against Bakunin for several months already.⁹ These considerations also allow us to put into perspective the hypothesis of mere personal dislike. From late 1868 onward Marx began to move against Bakunin, gathering information that he hoped would be damaging, and which he would use in 1872 to put Bakunin on trial and to exclude him from the IWA.¹⁰ If we assess the political nature of the conflict that opposed the two dominant personalities of the International, we must recognize that it was triggered by certain opportune moments.

THE POLITICAL QUESTION

In the spring of 1870 everything was in place to favor the beginning of a polemic conflict between the two theoreticians, but the outbreak of war postponed the beginning of political hostilities. After the Commune, Bakunin was still allied with Marx against the attacks of the Italian patriot Giuseppe Mazzini. But the London Conference, held in September 1871 as a substitute for conferences that international events prevented from taking place, marked the beginning of open hostilities. During the year

6. Marx to Engels, July 27, 1869 (Marx and Engels, *Correspondance*, 10:150). These accusations are also contained in a circular dated May 1872 from the General Council of the IWA on "Fictitious Splits within the International" [see note 3, above.]

7. For Marx, it was superfluous to put the suppression of inheritance rights in the program of the International, because the legal conditions of exploitation were supposed to disappear along with the exploitation itself. See in this regard the "Confidential Communication," which characterizes the proposition adopted at Basel as "Saint-Simonist old hat," and also Marx's expositions on inheritance rights presented to the General Council in July 1869, translated in the *Cahiers de l'I.S.E.A.* 152, Série S (August 1964): 199–212.

8. Marx to Engels, March 14, 1869, http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1869/letters/69_03_14.htm [Marx and Engels, *Correspondance*, 10:51–52].

9. On these two points see George Haupt, "La Confrontation de Marx et de Bakounine dans la Première Internationale: la phase initiale," in *Bakounine—Combats et débats*, ed. Jacques Catteau (Paris: Institut d'études slaves, 1977), 133–142.

10. Among the compromising elements, foremost is the relationship of Bakunin to the young Netchaïev. Marx had at first attempted to use the young Russian militant Serno-Solovievitch, but he informed Bakunin (see letter from Marx to Engels dated January 13, 1869 (http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1869/letters/69_01_13.htm)). However, Marx found Nicolas Outine to be a reliable informer, motivated by a lasting hatred for Bakunin.

that separated this conference from the Hague Congress, the legitimacy of its making certain decisions by select committee was the subject of heated debate, because that conference decided upon the question that divided the International, the question that would reveal the opposition between Marx and Bakunin: the political question.

The political question in this context is that of whether to restrict the “political movement,” which “as a means” to “the emancipation of the working class” must be subordinated to the organization of the working class as a political party competing in elections—the option endorsed by most Germans and by the English—or whether the different components of the European workers’ movement must coexist in a single organization, including those who think that workers’ freedom must be won through the ballot box, as well as those who counsel not only abstention from politics, but indeed nonparticipation in elections, and a joint struggle against the state and the bourgeoisie—Bakunin’s conception of politics.¹¹

— In September 1871 the London Conference, with the support of the
 IV Blanquists,¹² decided this question by entrusting to Marx the task of
 — reminding everyone that the correct interpretation of the statutes of the International was one based on the Inaugural Address, which affirmed that “the conquest of political power has become the primary duty of the working class.”¹³ This resolution, which led to the de facto transformation of the International into a grouping of political parties, and of its general council into a central committee, was the trigger for open conflict between the two tendencies within the IWA.¹⁴ When, in October 1871, the decisions made in London became known, they provoked a series of denunciations by whole federations of the International (Jura, Belgium, Italy, and Spain), which Bakunin did not instigate, but which he supported. Events followed which led to a Pyrrhic victory for the friends of Marx at the Hague Congress (September 1872), at which Bakunin and

11. Contrary to what Arthur Lehning suggests (“Introduction,” in Bakunin, *Œuvres complètes*, 2:xli), the debate over participation in elections did not stem from a faulty translation of the third clause in the statutes of the International in French (the omission of the words “comme moyens” in the clause: “l’émancipation des classes ouvrières est le grand but auquel tout mouvement politique doit être subordonné *comme moyen*”) but from the way the “mouvement politique” in question was interpreted, inasmuch as, in citing the clauses, Bakunin uses an exact translation but nonetheless maintains his abstentionist positions with regard to elections.

12. They would leave the International at the Hague Congress with the feeling that they had been used. The Blanquists wanted the International to constitute a sort of avant-garde for the revolutionary proletariat, and they wanted the General Council to be its headquarters.

13. As Arthur Lehning observes, “the *Adresse*, almost unknown in France, was never discussed by a congress and was never considered as a fundamental program” (“Introduction,” in Bakunin, *Œuvres complètes*, 2:xlili).

14. This resolution at The Hague became an addition to the language of an article, 7a: “In its struggle against the united power of the propertied classes, the proletariat can only act as a class if it constitutes itself as a political party, distinct and opposed to all the older political parties created by the propertied classes. This constitution of the proletariat as a political party is indispensable in order to insure the triumph of the social revolution and its highest purpose: the abolition of classes. The coalition of forces of the working class, already reached through economic struggle, shall also serve as a lever in the struggle against the political power of those who exploit the working class. Since the lords of the earth and of capital always use their political privileges to defend and perpetuate their monopolies and to subjugate labor, the conquest of political power has become the greatest duty of the proletariat.”

his friends were expelled from the International; and in the months that followed the majority of federations were also excluded, which eventually led to the end of the International.¹⁵

That which has been summarized in terms of an antagonism between Marx and Bakunin is thus not just a political conflict, but a conflict about politics, concerning participation in elections (or refusal to participate), behind which was taking shape the alternative between a seizure of power and the destruction of the state. But in the case of Marx, it is necessary to emphasize that the conflict between persons was not identical point for point to the conflict between their positions—and in the end, each man misunderstood the position of the other. Thus, during the polemic, Bakunin repeatedly attributed positions to Marx the latter did not hold (and which were actually those endorsed by the Lassallians) or which he no longer held (since what Bakunin knew of Marx was drawn from the *Manifesto* or from the Inaugural Address). From the 1860s onward, Marx had indicated very clearly the points on which he disagreed with the Lassallians, in particular accusing them of having wished to substitute state aid for the autonomous action of the proletariat; and with regard to the Commune, he recalled that the proletariat was not supposed to take control of the machinery of the state in order to operate it for its own benefit, but rather to destroy it.¹⁶

As for Marx, he recurrently accused Bakunin of being apolitical.¹⁷ Bakunin answered this charge in 1869, in a series of articles for the Genevan magazine *L'Égalité* entitled “The Politics of the International,”¹⁸ which formed part of a polemic taking place within the Romande Federation. Bakunin took to task some members of the federation for claiming that political and religious questions were unimportant to the association, in order to clear the way for certain former members of the Swiss Radical Party to enter the International.¹⁹ Bakunin’s argument was as follows: The International was indeed not built upon a political or religious foundation, but a strictly economic one (its purpose being the

15. On the maneuvers, great and small, to which the congress at The Hague gave rise, see Arthur Lehning’s “Introduction” to Bakunin, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 3.

16. As well as *La Guerre civile en France*, see the letter from Marx to Schweitzer dated October 13, 1868 (http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1868/letters/68_10_13.htm [Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *La Socialdémocratie allemande* (Paris: UGE, 1975), 50–53]). The critique of Lassallian tendencies within the German social-democratic movement is taken up again in 1875’s *Critique of the Gotha Program*.

17. In the article on “political indifferentism” he published in the *Almanacco Repubblicano per l’anno 1874* (<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1873/01/indifferentism.htm> [Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1973), 18: 299–304]), Marx caricatures the position of the anarchists: “It is not permitted for the working class to constitute itself as a political party, it is not permitted for that class to undertake any political action for any reason, because the fight against the state means recognition of the state, and that is in contradiction with eternal principles!”

18. This series of articles is found in Mikhail Bakunin, *The Basic Bakunin: Writings, 1869–1871*, trans. and ed. R. M. Cutler (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus 1992), 95–133 [*Le Socialisme libertaire*, 159–181]. Bakunin referred to it three years later (*Œuvres complètes*, vol. 3, 73 [121–122]—the numbers in brackets indicate pages in the manuscript) in order to emphasize the continuity of his positions.

19. See the series of articles *La Montagne*, in which Bakunin tries to expose such maneuvers (Bakunin, *The Basic Bakunin*, 82–92 [*Le Socialisme libertaire*, 141–158]).

autonomous organization of the solidarity of workers in their struggle against the bourgeoisie); but this only meant that the founders of the IWA had excluded all political (or religious) positions from the official platform of the IWA, thus avoiding conflict with elements of the working class that had not yet reached a clear position on these matters.²⁰ In practical terms this amounted to saying that only economic questions were really capable of uniting the workers, because they gave an objective basis to workers' mutual solidarity. Nevertheless, the founders of the International respected the fact that not everyone in the mass of European workers had developed to the same point in economic or intellectual terms. Even when a large part of the European proletariat had accepted antireligious ideas and had endorsed a particular political program, it would have been counterproductive to attempt to force the rest of the workers' movement to do as much, since such an attempt to exercise command authority might in turn have to suppress the reaction this would give rise to. The task of the International was, on the contrary, to champion the interests of the working class precisely in order that it become able to acquire the antireligious and political ideas adequate to its material situation.

For this reason, "the real politics of the workers, the politics of the International Association"²¹ had yet to be enunciated, and the International only excluded political tendencies from its ranks in order to avoid being transformed into a sect, or provoking the political prejudices of the workers. In the following articles, Bakunin gives his own interpretation of what the politics of the International should be: "abolition of all classes," "abolition of all territorial States, and of all national policies, and in their place, the establishment of a great international federation of all productive groups, national and local."²² But he also recognized that one could not demand at the outset that workers endorse this program in order to join the IWA.

This initial manner of conceiving the status of political questions within the International would be reformulated and refined over the course of the polemic against Marx. In 1869, it was a matter of showing that the International could construct its own politics, in order to oppose the entry of bourgeois politicians into the International. But from 1871 onward, Bakunin was one of those (including federalists and

20. Bakunin, *The Basic Bakunin*, 99 [*Le Socialisme libertaire*, 162]: "Had they unfurled the flag of some political or antireligious system, they hardly would have united the workers of Europe, but instead would have divided them even more. . . . Moreover there is still too great a difference in the level of industrial, political, intellectual, and moral development among the working masses in various countries for it to be possible today to unite them around a single political, anti-religious program. To suggest such a program for the International and to make it an absolute condition for admission into that Association, would be to establish a sect, not a worldwide association, and it would destroy the International."

21. *Ibid.*, 163–164.

22. *Ibid.*, 164–165.

antiauthoritarians) who had to defend themselves against the accusation that they were indifferent to the political question. As the text “Protest of the Alliance” would make clear in June 1871, “we are not abstracting away from all politics, because we positively want to destroy politics.”²³ For Bakunin, there were two kinds of political abstentionism: (1) You could make the social question independent of the political question, and ignore political struggle as something external to the fate of the proletariat. This was the spontaneous attitude of a part of the proletariat, and Bakunin saw this as a sign of their demoralization; (2) You could stop ignoring political struggles, and still hold that no particular political party was correct on the social question, something that would render the IWA a simple workers’ lobby. This latter position was opposed by Bakunin in 1869. In both cases, political abstentionism led to failure: the social question was not independent from the political question, and to put one’s destiny back into the hands of bourgeois politicians was to ensure that one would be betrayed.

The “Essay Against Marx,” which followed Bakunin’s exclusion from the International, contains the most complete accounts of this question. In 1872 two projected programs, as identified by Bakunin, were competing to see which would represent the policy of the International. The first, identified as that of Marx and denounced as communistic and authoritarian, consisted in making “the conquest of political power . . . a prior condition of the economic emancipation of the proletariat.” The second, upheld by the Alliance, “rejected all political action that did not aim immediately and directly at the triumph of workers (in their struggle) against capital.”²⁴ These two tendencies correspond to divergent readings of the clauses of the IWA statutes concerning the subordination of all political movements to the emancipation of the workers. The first concerns the political means for obtaining this emancipation, and considers that it must occur through gaining political power in elections. The second holds that the immediate conquest of such emancipation by the proletariat, against the bourgeoisie *and* against the state, constitutes the entire policy of the International.

In order to allow these two political tendencies to coexist within the International, it would be necessary to uphold the principle of “absolute freedom for propaganda, political as well as philosophical” thanks to which “the International admits no censorship, nor any ‘official truth’ in

23. Bakunin, *Protestation de l’Alliance*, 24. The complete manuscript of this text is found only on a CD edited by the International Institute of Social History of Amsterdam: Mikhail Bakunin, *Œuvres complètes* (IISG: Amsterdam, 2000) (the pagination given is that of the manuscript). A year later, speaking to Marxists, Bakunin said: “Between your politics and ours, there is in fact a great gulf. Yours is a positive politics, ours is all negative” (Bakunin, *Œuvres complètes*, 3:72 [120].)

24. Bakunin, *Œuvres complètes*, 3:173 [7]—emphasis Bakunin’s.

the name of which such censorship might be exercised,”²⁵ and Bakunin would remind everyone “that the International was only able to develop and grow in such a marvelous manner because it eliminated from its ‘official and obligatory’ program all political and philosophical questions.”²⁶ Equally, atheism could not be set up as an “obligatory principle,” although atheism constituted the “negative . . . point of departure” for all “serious philosophy.”²⁷ One could not “introduce *officially*, in an obligatory manner, into the statutes of the International” any particular political program, whether it be “that of the Blanquists,” that of Marx, or some “anarchic program.”²⁸ For Bakunin it was a matter of preserving not only the unity of the International, but also the spontaneous dynamic of the workers’ movement, which he, like Marx, considered to be the real source of the IWA.²⁹ In fact, just like religious ideas, abstract ideas that represent an outmoded state of the world, political principles are incapable of moving the masses: “What the masses everywhere want is their immediate economic emancipation. . . . If there is anywhere an ideal that the masses today are able to adore with passion, it is ‘*economic equality*.’”³⁰

VIII — When he opposed Marx with regard to the question of participation in elections, Bakunin did not demand that his personal political program become the program of the IWA. Throughout all the texts by Bakunin on the International, he maintains that it owes its success to the fact that it did not endorse any political or philosophical doctrine as official. In these areas Bakunin endorses complete freedom of opinion, and in this regard he looks on the International as an anticipation of society’s future.³¹ For him the International is nothing other than the systematization of an objective economic solidarity that links all workers together, and which must be the foundation of all social reorganization. Freedom in political matters, more than in the areas of religion or philosophy, implies the autonomy of different federations, in terms of national, economic, or political affinities, and the unity of the International is thus based on their freely entering into federation.

Thus the conflict on the question of politics is connected to a conflict that has to do with the political organization of the International, and this was the other cause of discord between the two major tendencies that existed within it. In fact, in December 1871, after the London

25. *Ibid.*, 174 [9–10].

26. *Ibid.*, 171 [4].

27. *Ibid.*, 177 [13–14].

28. *Ibid.*, 184 [24].

29. The International “did not come out of someone’s head or from the will of an individual or group of individuals, but from the very heart of the proletariat” (Bakunin, *Œuvres complètes*, 2:129).

30. Bakunin, *Œuvres complètes*, 2:178 [15].

31. *Ibid.*, 3:80 [135]: “If we are mystics and dreamers when we imagine that the International contains in germ the entire organization of future human society, then we must humbly confess that we are mystics, that we are dreamers.”

Conference, the Italian Sections, along with the Belgian and Spanish Federations, condemned the decisions made there, and demanded that the statutes of the International be rewritten in order to limit the role of the General Council to that of a simple center for statistics and correspondence, a proposition that was supported by the Jura Federation. Bakunin adopted this position in the texts relating to the polemic against Marx. In addition, at The Hague, on the motion of James Guillaume, a minority at the congress made a declaration in favor of federal autonomy that took the majority by surprise. It was expressed in moderate terms that allowed it to gain the signatures of the delegates of the federations of Spain, Belgium, Jura, and the Netherlands, but it did reject the authority of the General Council, and affirmed that only the autonomy of federations would allow unity to be maintained, and allow different political tendencies to be expressed. The “Essay against Marx” takes account of James Guillaume’s position at the Hague Congress. By following the principle of the autonomy of federations, it became possible to envision an International that would not be united by a single relationship to the political question, but which might pursue a single goal by different means. For example, this principle would not prevent German socialists from presenting workers’ candidates in elections.

But here again Bakunin attributes to Marx a position he did not hold. The Marxian conception of organization differs depending on whether we are talking about a labor union or a party. As regards labor unions, whose actions are purely defensive, Marx is completely opposed to centralism:

[C]entralist organisation, suitable as it is for secret societies and sect movements, contradicts the nature of the trades unions. Were it possible—I declare it *tout bonnement* to be impossible—it would not be desirable, least of all in Germany. Here, where the worker is regulated bureaucratically from childhood onwards, where he believes in authority, in those set over him, the main thing is to *teach him to walk by himself*.³²

But in terms of politics, for Marx it is necessary for the international proletariat to have a “central organ.”³³ This recognition of a necessary centrality for political action correlates directly to the centralization of

32. Letter to Schweitzer of October 13, 1868, http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1868/letters/68_10_13.htm (Marx’s emphasis).

33. See the end of the first section of the *Critique of the Gotha Program*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/ch01.htm>: “The international activity of the working classes does not in any way depend on the existence of the International Working Men’s Association. This was only the first attempt to create a central organ for the activity, an attempt which was a lasting success on account of the impulse which it gave but which was no longer realizable in its historical form after the fall of the Paris Commune.”

capital. In the “Confidential Communication” which he addressed to the Romande Federation (March 28, 1870) in the name of the General Council, Marx explains that the council had to have its headquarters in London, because in that way it would have

its hands directly upon the great lever of the proletarian revolution. . . . The English have all that is necessary for a social revolution. What they lack is a spirit of generalization and revolutionary passion. Only the General Council can supply this lack, which thus accelerates a really revolutionary movement in this country, and everywhere else as a result.

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— This is explained by the fact that England is “the metropolis of capital.” Even if “the revolutionary initiative will probably begin in France, England alone can serve as a lever for a truly economic revolution.”³⁴ The manner in which Marx apprehends the double component of the struggle of the proletariat for its own emancipation allows us, in turn, to reevaluate the position of Bakunin and his friends. Rather than speaking of political indifferentism, it is necessary to speak in terms of politics being replaced by labor-union action, and in this connection the writings of Bakunin on the International constitute the beginning of the “anarcho-syndicalist” tradition of which the Charter of Amiens, in France, would be in part a continuation. But the fact that Bakunin, in addition to his involvement in the IWA, also participated in political associations that were more or less secret, shows that politics could not be entirely reduced to labor unions—as would also be the case with Spanish anarchism.

THE QUESTION OF REPRESENTATION

For Bakunin the IWA was involved in a struggle between two parties: one “communist and authoritarian,” favoring the economic emancipation of the proletariat via the state; the other collectivist and anarchist, believing that such emancipation could only come through the destruction of the state, and thus refusing all participation in elections, refusing even to seize political power, as an instrument through which domination might be reversed, without even taking on any institutional existence. The preamble for the program of the International Alliance for Socialist Democracy indicates that within the IWA, the Alliance had “the special mission of studying political and philosophical questions on the basis of the great principle of the real and universal equality of all the human beings on earth.” Thus this is a political party, which not only adheres to the founding principles of the International (the organization

34. Cited by Lehning, “Introduction,” 341–342.

of the economic solidarity of all workers), but also maintains a program that is exclusively philosophical and political,³⁵ a political and philosophical interpretation of the program of the International. The Alliance did not intend to make its own program the political program of the International, but it did attempt to promote its own program through propaganda within the International—as every party was free to do.

As for secret organizations, their purpose is to constitute a noninstitutional power that is a source of public initiatives. Endowed with the same political program as the official Alliance, they are above all organs of propaganda and action which intend to bring about the revolution. Within these organs, Bakunin did admit a form of centralization, which was necessary so that all the members of the secret society might act in concert and be able to recognize each other at decisive moments.³⁶ It is in line with such texts that we should understand Bakunin's thoughts about the idea of a hidden but collective dictatorship, at the time of his break with Netchaïev.³⁷ In return, as "The Political Theology of Mazzini" emphasizes, the International is not a secret society, but the expression of the revolutionary spontaneity of the people.³⁸ But although economic solidarity was the direction in which the international workers' movement was headed, the movement still lacked a political orientation in accordance with that direction, an orientation which the Alliance, and within it the secret organization, must first publicize, and then in case of a revolutionary crisis, seek to impose.

Once we consider the International as the early form of a future society,³⁹ the critique of centralization within the International can be seen as continuous with a critique of state centralization.⁴⁰ The role of secret societies and the influence they exert can only be understood in terms

35. This can be summed up in seven points: atheism; political, social, and economic equality; equality of the means of development for each individual (means of maintaining oneself, of education and instruction, identical for all); social republic; disappearance of states "into the universal union of free associations, both agricultural and industrial;" international solidarity of workers as the basis for all politics; principle of free federation in order to unite local associations. One might compare this conception of the relationship between the IWA and the Alliance to the situation that would arise later in Spain between the CNT and the FAI.

36. See the *Statuts secrets de l'Alliance* written during the autumn of 1868, and *Fraternité internationale. Programme et objet* (late 1868).

37. Bakunin, *Œuvres complètes*, 5:237: "But if we are anarchists, you ask, by what right do we desire to act to move the people, and by what means will we do so? Since we reject all authority, with the aid of what power, or rather, by what force will we direct the popular revolution? By means of an invisible force that will have no public character and which will be not be imposed on anyone; by means of the collective dictatorship of our organization which will be all the more powerful for remaining invisible, undeclared and without any legal or official role" (emphasis Bakunin's). There is an apparent political weakness of Bakunin on this point: that which prevents the invisible force from becoming a new source of domination is simply its morality and its program: "These groups, desiring nothing for themselves, neither profit, nor honors, nor authority, will be able to direct the popular movement against all those who are ambitious, disunited and fighting against one another, and to guide that movement toward the fullest possible realization of the economic and social ideal, and toward the greatest possible organization of popular liberty. That is what I call the collective dictatorship of the secret organization." (Bakunin, *Œuvres complètes*, 5:238—Bakunin's emphasis).

38. Bakunin, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:28.

39. Whence the insistence, from 1869, on cooperation (see the article "On Cooperation" in Bakunin, *The Basic Bakunin*, 151–154 [191–197]) and on the unions of resistance, which are anticipations of solidarity in postrevolutionary society. These two themes are taken up again in the *Protestation de l'Alliance*, 32–33.

40. This critique is sharpened from the point when Bakunin is a militant in the IWA: it is no longer a matter of attacking the artificial character of centralization, opposed to free federation as the continuance of a natural movement, but of recognizing the role, both administrative and repressive, of the state in exploitation. At the same time, the political vision of Bakunin is altered, and economic federalism tends to replace merely political federalism.

of their opposition to something they want very much to prevent: the continuation or reconstitution of political domination in the aftermath of a revolutionary crisis. Bakunin is opposed to even the existence of national assemblies, just as he is to any form of political centralization in workers' organizations. Bakunin's critique is directed against the centralizing character of representative assemblies,⁴¹ which are based on the fiction of action in the general interest; and in this way his position is in conformity with Proudhon's. The representatives, not through some inherent vice but simply in virtue of their position, can only betray those they represent, and end up constituting a new oligarchy.⁴² The only possible solution that would not cause the happiness of some to be gained at the expense of unhappiness for others⁴³ is for the directly interested parties to form an association that answers their needs, their interests, and their affinities. When based on universal suffrage, the representative system administered in a centralized framework thus perpetuates the old oppression, but in the name of the people and of their interests. One may define such a system as the oppression of the masses of the people by an abstraction, the nation, in the name of another abstraction, the general interest. Bakunin extends this critique to cover the principle of imperative mandate, which can only lead to two things: either discussion is impossible and there follows a succession of majority votes that ends up satisfying no one, or else, even more certainly, "the imperative mandates imposed upon each deputy will be at such variance with regard to every question that the Assembly will not get a majority for any of them, and will adjourn having resolved nothing."⁴⁴ Thus it is useless to search for a good government, just as it is useless to wish for a good Church or a good state. A single task is laid upon a people who want to free themselves, and "this is not at all to reform the Government, the Church or the State, but to abolish all of them," which would lead to "anarchy from the political or governmental point of view," but to "the organization of order . . . from the economic and social point of view."⁴⁵

In thinking this, Bakunin seeks to attack not only the illusions with which the radical bourgeois might lull the workers, but also the social-democracy current in the Germany of that time, which he considered to have been inspired by Marx. But the annotations Marx made for *Statism*

41. Bakunin, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:168: "Any so-called popular representation by a *centralist* Assembly of any kind, even one elected by universal suffrage and under circumstances that appear as favorable as possible to make the Assembly sincere, will always be more or less a fiction, and when you say fiction, you are saying it's a lie." (Bakunin's emphasis).

42. Bakunin, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:169.

43. Outside this framework, universal suffrage itself has no value: "Universal suffrage, not organized by different and free workers' associations, but exercised by the mechanical aggregation of millions of individuals who make up the totality of a nation, is an excellent means of oppressing and ruining the people in the name of, and on pretext of a so-called popular will." (Bakunin, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:189 [57–58]).

44. Bakunin, *Œuvres complètes*, 170.

45. Bakunin, *Œuvres complètes*, 174.

and Anarchy describe the conditions under which universal suffrage might work in terms close to those that can be found in Bakunin:

Election is a political form present in the smallest Russian commune and artel. The character of the election does not depend on this name, but on the economic foundation, the economic situation of the voters, and as soon as the functions have ceased to be political ones, there exists 1) no government function, 2) the distribution of the general functions has become a business matter, that gives no one domination, 3) election has nothing of its present political character.⁴⁶

The actualization of a political form depends on the material conditions under which it takes place. In the framework of former relations of domination, it will be these relations that it will express. But when these relations have come to an end, the election will lose its political character—that is, its state function—and will simply be a technical procedure for dividing functions within a commune. Here we come close to the idea expressed by Bakunin three years before, according to which an election can only be valid in places where economic and social conditions have been radically transformed.⁴⁷

But this rapprochement does not, for all that, obviate the conflict concerning the question of doing away with politics. Fundamentally, Bakunin's hostility to the idea of organizing the proletariat into a political party that intends to accede to political power is based on an analysis of the historical role of the state that involves the Bakuninist conception of historical materialism. Several texts criticize the Marxian concept of history for paying too much attention to economic determinations, and ignoring as it were the return shock of effects upon their causes. A draft letter to *La Liberté* (Brussels) in October 1872 concerning the role played by institutions in capitalist exploitation allows us to understand his reaction:

[Marx] takes no account of other elements of history, such as the reaction, which for all that is evident, of political, legal and religious institutions relative to the economic situation. He says: "Misery produces political slavery, the State," but he does not allow us to turn that phrase around and say: "Political slavery, the State, reproduces

46. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1874/04/bakunin-notes.htm> [Marx and Bakunin, *Socialisme autoritaire ou libertaire* (Paris: UGE, 1975), vol.2, 379.]

47. Marx adds: "With collective property the supposed will of the people disappears, and gives way to the real will of the cooperative" (<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1874/04/bakunin-notes.htm>).

and maintains misery as a condition of its existence, such that in order to destroy misery, it's necessary to destroy the State." And it's strange that he forbids his adversaries to attack political slavery, the State, as the *present* cause of misery, and commands his friends and his disciples in the democratic socialist Party in Germany to consider the conquest of power and political liberties as the absolutely necessary preliminary condition for economic emancipation.⁴⁸

Bakunin is not opposed to a reading of history in materialist terms, but seeks to refine it by pointing out that the effects of determinant causes in the last instance necessarily tend to subordinate the conditions of their appearance. It may be true that political, religious, and legal entities are so many reflections of the economic conditions of a society, but it is no less true that those conditions are later subsumed under these entities, which attempt to conserve themselves, and thus seek to prolong the conditions of their existence; whence a partial reversal of the relationship between the conditions and that of which they are the condition. The development of capitalist production may determine the appearance of the modern state, but the state ends up as a condition of the existence of this mode of production. This distinction allows us to account for an apparent paradox. In the same texts, Bakunin borrows from Marx the history of the implementation of the capitalist mode of production, as expounded in the *Manifesto* and the Inaugural Address of 1864, and shows that the capitalist mode owes its appearance to the dissolution of the guilds and to the supposed "freeing" of the countryside,⁴⁹ but he agrees that capitalist exploitation is based on inheritance rights. So it is appropriate to distinguish between the conditions of appearance of this mode of production (its historical origin) and the manner in which it functions. It may be true that the modern state and its legal institutions obey the demands of capitalist production, but it is just as true that the latter generates the conditions of its own preservation, for example by getting the state to guarantee inheritance rights.

This critique of historical materialism as economic reductionism allows Bakunin to answer the accusation of apoliticism, which had been made against the anarchists. They can be accused of incoherence, in both renouncing political action and denouncing the role played by the state in the exploitation of the masses. But in 1872, Bakunin can turn the argument around: not only is the anarchist position coherent, since it

48. Bakunin, *Œuvres complètes*, 3:162–163 [29]. This analysis is found already in the unpublished continuation of the *Protestation de l'Alliance* dated August 1871 (available only on CD; Bakunin, *Œuvres complètes*, page 7 of the manuscript).

49. Bakunin, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:220–226.

is not apolitical but antipolitical, and takes account of the downstream effects of the modern state upon the historical conditions of its appearance; ultimately it is the supposed position of the Marxists that contains a contradiction, because while they unilaterally emphasize economic determinations, they advise the proletariat to take control of the state apparatus. Strictly speaking, it is this position, attributed to Marx (but actually the position of Lassalle) that would appear to lead to apoliticism, if it is true that all that is necessary is to wait for a transformation of economic conditions in order for the end of political domination to arrive.

TWO MILITANT TYPES

The way in which Bakunin accounts for his experience as a militant in the International can be understood as entirely accordant with his position on the political question. In the IWA, he did not oppose the fact that sections designated delegates to represent them (he himself represented the workers of Naples at the Basel Congress). What he opposed was rather the General Council's being promoted to the status of the political center of the association. Thus there is such a thing as "good representation," to which one may also apply the principle of the imperative mandate, but it presupposes a prior reorganization of society upon a socialist and federalist basis, for which the International might constitute a preliminary version, if it does not degenerate into a bureaucratic organization, and if it continues to respect the diversity of opinion in accordance with a principle of autonomy.

On this point the "Protest of the Alliance" written during the summer of 1871 (in anticipation of the attacks which the General Council indeed soon leveled against Bakunin and his friends) contains a valuable analysis of the bureaucratization that workers' organizations may fall victim to, and which threatens to make them into new, embryonic state-like entities.⁵⁰ In this text Bakunin draws the political lessons to be learned from his experience as a militant in the International, in particular from observations he made concerning the members of the Geneva committees.⁵¹

Through their sacrifices and their devotion, they got used to giving commands (and enjoying this), and by a sort of natural hallucination almost inevitable among people who wield power for too long, they ended up imagining that they were indispensable men. This is how, imperceptibly,

50. It is nonetheless striking that Bakunin turns away from the original object of his manuscript (the defense of the Alliance) in order to attack in relation to the question of bureaucratization, without asking about the eventual embryo of a bureaucracy which the secret societies might engender.

51. Bakunin continues in these pages the observations and judgments of the Russian militant Serno-Solovievitch (who died prematurely) with regard to building-trades strikes in Geneva.

even in sections that were so frankly popular as those of the construction workers, a sort of governmental aristocracy arose. . . . Do we have to tell you how unfortunate this state of affairs was for those sections themselves? It reduced them little by little to nothing. . . . With the growing authority of committees, there naturally developed indifference and ignorance on the part of sections concerning all questions other than those having to do with strikes and payment of dues. . . . This is a natural consequence of the moral and intellectual apathy of these sections, and this apathy in return is the equally necessary result of the automatic subordination to which the authoritarianism of the Committees has reduced the sections.⁵²

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If the Geneva International was such a perfect example for Bakunin, it was because individuals who had no personal ambitions ended up occupying positions of power. This was a matter of militants who were devoted to their duties, men to whom the membership of the Geneva International had been accustomed to confiding the most important tasks. These men inevitably got in the habit of making decisions in the place of the members themselves, and eventually separated themselves as if they were a government, and the others the subjects of their administration. They forgot that their force resides in the masses, and that it is the masses who are supposed to be raising themselves up. This gradual separation between delegates and the base was self-reinforcing. Delegates began to think they were indispensable, and began to look down upon their comrades, seeing them as an amorphous mass that must obey their orders. But this is precisely the first effect of such separation, to produce apathy among the masses and to set up an aristocracy, which has privileged access to the most important questions, whether social or political. In short, the Geneva sections fell into a vicious circle, in which apathy fed authoritarianism, which in turn contributed to apathy. When the base begins to have leaders, it loses its direction.⁵³

The higher one looks in the governing bodies of the Romande Federation, the greater this degeneration within the sections. Just as section leaders had come to constitute a de facto government ruling over the mass of militants, the central committee of Geneva had acquired more and more power over the sections. Bakunin notes the political consequences of such authoritarian functioning: the existence of a

52. *Protestation de l'Alliance*, pages 4–5 of the manuscript.

53. An analysis of this passage is given in Marc Vuilleumier, "Bakounine et le mouvement ouvrier de son temps," in Catteau, ed., *Bakounine—Combats et débats*, 124.

governmental aristocracy in the Geneva sections allowed the International to be placed at the service of bourgeois radicals during elections. Thus there is a correlation between the appearance of an authoritarian power within the International and the spread of the idea that support for certain bourgeois candidates who might support workers' aspirations could have some effectiveness. Allowed to act without any oversight from their base, committee delegates became a sort of internal bourgeoisie, ready to negotiate with the real bourgeoisie, despite their personal honesty.

For Bakunin there were two ways of countering this "delegationist" drift. In order to prevent the central committee from acquiring authority over sections, it was important to reaffirm the principle of the autonomy of the sections. Bakunin remarks that within the sections, the power of delegates is brought into question when general assemblies are organized, assemblies in which the delegates cannot decide among themselves what the entire section will do, but are constrained by the power of the mass, which deliberates and makes its own decisions collectively.⁵⁴ In a general assembly, the idea is to substitute the natural power of influence for authorities, which are by definition visible and official. Bakunin conceived the role of the International as a whole within the mass of workers in the same way. In fact, he remarked, the legitimacy of the International could be challenged on the grounds that it only represented a minority of the international proletariat, and thus had no mandate to represent it or to speak in its name, or to put itself forward as having some sort of power over the workers of all countries. In conducting its struggle, the International had only used two means, not always legal, but legitimate nonetheless: propaganda directed at the workers, and their class-based organization.⁵⁵ Within the workers' movement the International exercised influence in the same way that a secret society was supposed to accomplish its task following the revolution: without constraint, and using nothing but the influence of propaganda.

Bakunin's conception of revolutionary action is thus based on a model of diffusion of influence radiating from a focus point. A small group holding revolutionary convictions of the strongest sort, whatever its name (Alliance, official or secret, International brotherhood), diffuses its principles throughout the International, which in turn diffuses its principles throughout the proletariat of all countries. It should be noted that by proposing concrete formal procedures (decisions to be taken by the entire assembly, the autonomy of sections), Bakunin provided better protection from authoritarian deviations for the International than for

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54. On the praise of general assemblies as a means par excellence of reestablishing democracy and on the defense of the principle of the autonomy of sections, see *Protestation de l'Alliance*, 11–12.

55. *Protestation de l'Alliance*, 70–78.

his secret societies. But the explanation is that he was affected by the conflict with Marx in this regard. He interpreted Marx's communism as a way of resolving the social question through the state, and thus as a political theory that expected to gain power through elections (and thus distinct from Blanquism).

If in fact all dialogue between Bakunin and Marx was impossible, it was not only because of the personal antipathy between the two, but also because they were not talking from the same position, nor about the same thing—which, nevertheless, does not mean their political conceptions could ever be reconciled in any way. When he reflected critically on his experience as a militant, Bakunin spoke of the day-to-day functioning of sections of the International, whereas Marx sought to conceive the possibility of a kind of political action proper to the working class. Understanding what is irreconcilable between the political practices of Bakunin and Marx in the International, and also the reasons why they never managed to understand each other, requires us to take into account the difference in their positions and in the objects on which they reflected. The problem for Marx is to think the conditions of autonomous political action by the proletariat. This autonomy does not only imply the constitution of the proletariat as a party, distinct from all the other parties, but also the creation of new political forms—this is the historical role Marx gives to the Paris Commune. Bakunin's questions mainly concern the risk that forms of political domination will reappear even in the very organizations that are supposed to be working for the emancipation of the proletariat. ■

ABSTRACT

The conflict between Marx and Bakunin within the First International was more than a merely political opposition. It was in fact a conflict about the very status of the political. Accused of being apolitical, Bakunin replied by declaring his anti-statist stance, while at the same time misinterpreting the Marxian political project. The position he defended within the International prefigured the anarcho-syndicalist subsumption of the political within syndicalism. In return, the opposition helped to clarify the Marxian conception of worker organizations. Finally, the conflict would enable Bakunin to identify the dangers of bureaucratization to which such organizations are prone, while Marx, for his part, sought to conceive of a type of political action which was specific to the proletariat. The conflict thus enables us to characterize Marx and Bakunin as two types of militant engagement.